





# Artists of Abraham Lincoln portraits

Stephen Alcorn

Excerpts from newspapers and other  
sources

From the files of the  
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection




B O O K  
L O V E R S'  
B O O K  
S T O R E S



BY KAREN S. CHAMBERS

Without a doubt, people are  
passionate about



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The all-inclusive expression "from A to Z" would not have meant much to the Phoenicians or the ancient Greeks. In their alphabets the Z was the sixth and seventh letter, respectively. Even the Romans didn't have a Z at the end of their alphabet until around the first century B.C. † The 26th letter of our alphabet was the seventh in the Semitic alphabet. They called the letter *zay* (pronounced "zag") and drew it as a stylized dagger. The Phoenicians used a similar graphic sign, which they called *zayin*, which also meant "dagger" or "weapon" in their language. Roughly the same symbol is also represented in other cultures, with the same meaning. † Around 1000 B.C. the Phoenician *zayin* became the Greek *zeta*. The Greek character, while looking more like a dagger than the Phoenician *zayin*, did not look like the Z we currently know. Actually it looked more like our present capital I. If it were set in a slab serif typeface, such as ITC Lubalin Graph: † The Romans incorporated the zeta into their alphabet, but since the sound was not required by the Latin language they eventually dropped it, giving the position of the seventh letter to the G. In fact, the only reason the Z is in our present-day alphabet is because the Romans later found that they needed it to write a few new words they acquired after conquering the Greeks. Because it was not a part of the traditional Roman language, the letter was relegated to last spot in the alphabetical hierarchy. † The Romans used a modified version of the Greek zeta in their monumental inscriptions, although there is not one to be found in the famous Trojan Column. It was only when the

letter was written by scribes and calligraphers that the top and bottom strokes began to be offset from each other and connected by what became a diagonal, rather than vertical, stroke. This design change was probably made because it was quicker and easier to write that way. The lower case z is just a smaller version of the capital for the same reason. † Although many people

might not notice it, the Z takes on two forms. If drawn with a chisel-edged pen or broad, flat brush, held in a natural position, the horizontal would be thick and the diagonal would be thin.

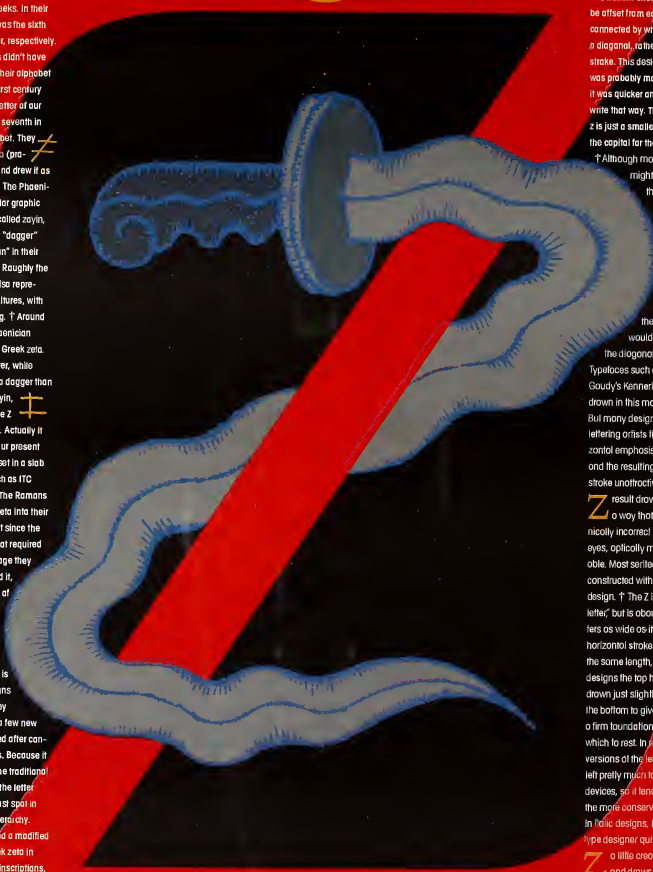
Typesets such as Trojanus and Goudy's Kennerley have the Z drawn in this manner.

But many designers and lettering artists find this horizontal emphasis unsatisfactory and the resulting weak middle stroke unattractive, and as a

result draw the letter in a way that may be technically incorrect but, to their eyes, optically more comfortable. Most serifed typefaces are constructed with this modified design. † The Z is not a "square letter," but is about three-quarters as wide as it is tall. The horizontal strokes are usually the same length, but in many designs the top horizontal is drawn just slightly shorter than the bottom to give the letter

a firm foundation on which to rest. In Roman versions of the letter, the Z is left pretty much to its own devices, so it tends to be one of the more conservative letters. In italic designs, however, the type designer quite often takes a little creative freedom and draws the lower horizontal with a slight flair, or even a full-fledged swash.

Allen Haley





*Lincoln*

In His  
Own Words

by Joyce Rutter Kaye



Abraham Lincoln's writings eloquently reveal the deep divisions in race, politics, morals and emotions which tore the country apart in his lifetime. Those

words have provided a wealth of inspiration for illustrator

Stephen Alcorn. The dramatic black and white linocuts he

created for *Lincoln: In His Own Words* (Harcourt Brace, 1993)

*Smith - Do we have this book?*  
literally reflect the contrasts which characterized that period

of American history, with portraits as graceful and inviting

as an antebellum garden party to

searing exposés of slavery's degradation of the human spirit. The

book, a collection of the president's

speeches, letters and other writings,

appealed to Alcorn on a personal

and an artistic level. In his illustrator's note he writes, "I saw this book

as a rare opportunity to give expression and tangible shape to the multitude of haunting and symbolic

images that the name Abraham Lincoln has conjured up

in my mind for as long as I can remember." ♦ Alcorn's renditions of those images provide immediate insight to his

interpretative approach to subject matter. Rather than allowing the text to dictate the illustrations, Alcorn suggested

supplementing contextual images with portraits of Lincoln's contemporaries intermittently

throughout the book. This nonlinear approach was welcomed by the

publisher and author/editor Milton



publisher and author/editor Milton

Alcorn allows his subconscious to compose a project and mold

each piece he creates: the dialogue between subject matter

and subconscious mind results

in work that ranges from the literal

to the impressionistic. ♦ Alcorn

acknowledges that very few people

associate the latter style with relief

block printing. He feels this book

allowed him the freedom to continue

to finesse the painterly quality he

lends to a relatively restricting and

unforgiving medium. This is per-

haps best seen in the book's center

spread, which depicts the crowd at Lincoln's inauguration

with merely a suggestion of forms and faces—it is mostly an

abstract swirl of top hats, bonnets and beards. Alcorn drew

the piece directly on a block of linoleum without using a reference. "There's a sense of rhythm and motion there which

is very much an homage to impressionism," Alcorn says.

"Ironically, you don't see relief block

printing in this way. I continually try to

strive for impression, not detail and

accuracy." ♦ This is precisely why





*Book cover: Lincolniana 1993 Artist file: Alcorn, Stephen*



Alcorn, age 35, was attracted to linoleum rather than wood when he switched to relief block printing after painting for many years. Encouraged to try the medium by his father, the late, noted illustrator John Alcorn, he preferred the "fluidity" of linoleum over wood as well as its ability to allow him to be as spontaneous as drawing with charcoal or pen and ink. For this reason, he rejects the notion that relief block printing is a relatively

primitive art form, believing that one can also achieve a high level of sophistication with it. He also enjoys its element of surprise; creating the first print from linoleum, which is cut backwards and in reverse, is much like developing a set of prints from negatives. "No one knows the angst of printmaking," he says. ♦ Although he has been experimenting with color

and reduction prints for five years, Alcorn says he welcomed a "healthy" return to black and white for the Lincoln book (only the cover and title pages have color). "I wanted to get a sense of tension, movement, rhythm, pattern and upheaval literally by the abstract signs I've imbued in each portrait," he says. "The contrast between black and white is an appropriate



means of expression to this period."

Beyond the technical fulfillment he received from creating the book (and continues to enjoy, as he works

on a follow-up book on Frederick Douglass for HB's Spring, 1995 catalog) the artist enjoyed its emotional

release. He discovered his sympathies

revealed themselves as he worked. His portrait of Stephen Douglas, a political opponent of Lincoln and a slavery supporter, is a "portrait which borders on the caricature." And his print of a slave in shackles challenged his ability to simultaneously reveal a man's oppression while conveying his strength



and indomitable spirit. ● The piece is a plea for basic human liberty, the cornerstone of Lincoln's beliefs and writings. In an 1854 speech presenting the moral case against slavery Lincoln said: "Near 80 years ago we began by declaring that all men are created equal; but now from that beginning we have run down to the other declaration, that for some men to enslave others is a 'sacred right of

self-government.' These principles cannot stand together.

They are as opposite as God and Mammon; and whoever holds to the one, must despise the other." ■ These persuasive words and other excerpts in *Lincoln: In His Own Words*

continue to resonate with meaning today. In the same way,

Alcorn's illustrations succeed in bringing form to Lincoln's words while also appealing to con-

temporary concerns of human rights and freedom—issues which transcend time, place and borders.





# BOOK LOVERS' BOOK STORES



BY KAREN S. CHAMBERS

Without a doubt, people are passionate about books. They carry on love affairs with the written word at their favorite trysting places—bookstores. Although new technological advances are transforming the physical nature of producing the printed word, bookstores are still cherished by many people who prefer to hold a book

instead of a mouse while reading *Jane Eyre*. Books continue to be bought, consumed and collected, whether they are the newest Danielle Steel paperback bought at the supermarket checkout, or a leather-bound first edition found in an antiquarian bookstore. Here are a handful of bookstores which are as beloved to their devotees as their favorite novels.

There's nothing like the hometown bookstore for a place of comfort. Don Ellegood, director of the University of Washington Press, cites Elliott Bay Books as one of his two favorite bookstores in the world. The bookstore fills several storefronts in Seattle's Pioneer Square, managing at once to be both gargantuan yet intimate. The staff is knowledgeable; and a coffee bar located on the lower level gives patrons the chance to linger over a café latte and their new book among the homey wooden shelves of general interest titles. Elliott Bay has become a fixture on the book promotion circuit and hosts an author reading nearly every day of the week.

Ellegood finds it informal and enjoyable; its atmosphere is "heartwarming to any author, any publisher, anywhere, anytime."

In New York there's Three Lives Bookstore in Greenwich Village. There, transplanted Britisher Michael McLoughlin of Thwaite Productions, a firm which produces audio tours for museum exhibitions, enjoys the old-fashioned ambience of this bookshop owned by three women who are inveterate readers. They specialize in fiction, from the classic to the contemporary, and all are eager to share their latest finds with the browser. McLoughlin, a collector of 19th century first editions, loves to wander in and ask any one of the owners for her latest recommendations. "I read mostly 19th century literature, since that's what I collect, and haven't really read very much contemporary writing," says McLoughlin. "The ladies at Three Lives are very in tune with what's happening now. It's a great place to go to be stimulated. I can always find a new writer there. I remember

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